

Keeping Your Children Safe

It seems that on a daily basis I receive calls regarding the laws on proper child restraint. There is much confusion amongst parents on what is the lawful and safe way to transport their children. In fact, a handful of the calls I have received have been to settle a friendly dispute between parents or friends on exactly what the law says or what is the safest thing to do. However, often the law and best practice are not in agreement.

RI General Law 31-22-22 states that children under age seven, less than fifty-four inches tall and weighing less than 80 pounds must be transported in any rear seating position and properly restrained in a child restraint system.

Children under one year *and* less than 20 pounds must ride-rear facing. If a child reaches 20 pounds but is not yet one year, they should remain rear-facing in a child restraint that will accommodate a child of this weight. It is important to read all the labels on the restraint to determine what the rear-facing upper limit is. Never restrain a child contrary to the manufacturer's instructions.

Children over one year and 20 pounds *can* ride forward-facing, however we recommend that they stay rear-facing longer. Studies show that children are safer rear-facing. Generally speaking, the newer convertible seats (ones that can be used forward and rear-facing) can accommodate a child rear-facing until 30-35 pounds. Keep the child rear-facing as long as possible, or until the child's head is within one inch of the top of the seat back.

Once the child turns to forward-facing, they should stay that way, in the harness system, as long as the manufacturer's instructions allow; generally this is 40 pounds. It is important to read the manufacturer's instructions when you turn a seat from rear-facing to forward-facing to make sure you make all the necessary adjustments.

Generally, **after a child reaches 40 pounds**, they can move into a booster seat without a harness. A booster must always be used with a lap *and* shoulder belt, never with a lap-only belt. There are two basic styles of belt positioning booster seats – low back and high back. A high back should be used when there is no head protection in the vehicle, however if a vehicle has a head-rest or a high seat, a low back booster is sufficient and more cost effective.

RI law allows the child to move out of the booster and into the vehicle seat when he/she turns seven. The exception to this is if the child is 80 pounds or 4 ½ feet tall before turning seven. Unfortunately, what is the law is not always what is safest for your child. We recommend that the child be restrained in a booster seat past seven years of age. The “test” to determine if your child is big enough to ride without a booster is fairly simple. Sit your child on the vehicle seat with his/her rear end all the way up against the back of the seat. Do his/her knees bend naturally over the vehicle seat or does he/she have to scoot forward to bend their knees? If your child can sit all the way back on the

vehicle seat with his/her knees bent naturally over the edge of the seat, he/she is tall enough to sit without a booster. The seatbelt should sit low and tight over the hips and not ride up over their abdominal area. Children are often nine or more when they are big enough to ride safely in an adult belt.

Because of the high misuse rate of child safety seats (98%), it is recommended that all parents take their seats to be checked by a Certified Child Passenger Safety Technician. Parents can call their local police department or a State Police barracks to schedule an appointment to have their seat checked.

For more information, go to <http://www.risp.state.ri.us/safekids.php> .